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Books

Secret Is Out: Spies Not What They Used to Be

BY ROBERT KIRSCH

PARIS—The line between fiction and fact is becoming increasingly blurred and so is the line between literature and politics. The latest case in point is the revelations by retired French intelligence agent, Phillippe Thyraud de Vosjoli, now established as the source of the plot for Leon Uris' otherwise ho-hum novel "Topaz."

One of De Vosjoli's basic errors appears to be in selecting Uris as his original channel. He could have guaranteed a more effective novel with say, John Le Carre, Eric Ambler, or even Len Deighton. Graham Greene probably would have turned the idea down—the theme, presumably, might not ignite inspiration, considering his attitudes toward the United States.

The blurring of function has produced interesting results. In response to stories in Le Canard Enchaine, an energetically satirical weekly, and the Observer of London, which raced to scoop the Sunday Times of London, and Life magazine (journalism is not without its intelligence networks in these spy-conscious days), a French government official (unnamed) gave his literary and political review:

"It is all very comic and we await with serenity the revelations of this so-called espionage affair."

Later, a one-line official release (something can be said for the compression of the review) termed the story "completely ridiculous and of the highest absurdity."

It is hardly disinterested criticism, although readers of "Topaz" may agree with the assessment of the Sunday Times of London that "the novel . . . does contain highly colored, not to say breathless, references to aspects of this story."

If most observers are agreed on the literary judgment, what about the truth or falsity of M. de Vosjoli's exposé? Well, history will have to provide the facts. Presumably, we may expect these soon. The new look in espionage and counterespionage, is faintly Madison Ave. Spies, defectors, agents, can hardly wait until the invisible ink is dry on their reports before rushing into print.

There are two discernible effects: such writers as Le Carre are driven to a somber realism, perhaps even naturalism. Their spies are gravy-stained and paunchy, tending toward the neurotic as a kind of service-connected disability. They tire easily, make mistakes and are extremely human. Other writers such as James Munro and the late Ian Fleming go in the opposite direction, writing surreal fantasies of thin-lipped official killers who are irresistible to extravagantly beautiful women and are given to exotic forms of violence and sex.

Such old-fashioned romantic types as Somerset Maugham's Ashenden are unfashionable, yet one yearns for a new Buchan or Frances Beeding.

But there is no room for them, anymore. You can hardly find the archetypal character since the appearance of David Stone's "The Tired Spy" some 10 years ago. Take Martel, the code name for a Russian believed to be one Anatoly Dolnytsin, whose defection to the West in 1961, started the whole affair.

Martel is reported by the Times to be "unremarkable: middle-aged, middle height, solidly built, with jet black hair brushed back, small rather Slavic eyes, and tight lips." University-trained, speaking impeccable, if slightly accented English, he is hardly the romantic sort. In fact, he is a family man, having managed in the course of his defection to take his entire family along. Can you imagine him as the hero in a novel?

Hardly. He appears to be a sort of computer man, with a bookkeeper's mind. This served him well and he is said to have blown the whistle on more than 200 KGB agents in the West including Kim Philby (again no heroic figure by spy novel standards), Col. Stig Wennerstrom of Sweden, a stolid, unimaginative type (in a recent book, even his biographer conceded that Wennerstrom was far from an interesting man) and other assorted fish.

It is Martel who presumably revealed the existence of an official close to President De Gaulle, who was able to influence French policy, provide information on NATO to the Soviets so efficiently that top secret reports were in Moscow within 48 to 72 hours.

If there is such a mystery man, one can only hope that he is somewhat more in the tradition of the spy novels. So far, the French have only come up with one, Georges Paques, a French NATO official who is now in prison and under intensive investigation. Not much has been reported in the press about M. Paques except that he appears to have been working for some other nation. This is excessively old-fashioned of the French, the reticence; hardly in the new mode.

But then again, and this is what also hurts espionage fiction, the plots are so mundane. M. Paques is reported to have been a jolly, talkative sort of person, who lived beyond his means. He does not appear to have been the proper kind of agent for a circle such as "Sapphire," which is the name (and one of the few imaginative elements) revealed by Martel as the KGB name for the French spy ring.

Perhaps in an effort to improve the plot, the French appear to be suggesting that M. de Vosjoli is a CIA agent and a "defector," which he strongly denies. There is even some evidence that the CIA is unhappy about his revelations at this point in Franco-American relations. But M. de Vosjoli's motivations are not our concern. It is

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